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ABSTRACT

The literature on retention of adult learners strongly suggests that previous educational attainment is closely tied to participation and persistence. Educationally disadvantaged adults are more likely to lack self-confidence and self-esteem, have negative attitudes toward education, and need mastery of basic skills such as literacy before attaining job skills that could improve their economic circumstances. Adult educators seeking to improve retention rates of economically disadvantaged individuals in their classrooms should not attempt to seek 100 percent retention. Rather, they should identify which types of retention are harmful to the vitality of their program and to student objectives. They should begin their retention efforts with recruitment, target recruiting to those whom the program is best equipped to serve, emphasize placement and counseling early on, and follow up inactive students with phone calls. Special attention should be given to developing and using strategies to deal with students' low self-confidence, perception of social disapproval, situational barriers, negative attitudes, and low personal priority. Besides lists of specific strategies for these purposes, the literature also contains descriptions of adult basic education programs that have succeeded in retaining high numbers of educationally disadvantaged learners. (MN)

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STRATEGIES FOR RETAINING ADULT STUDENTS: THE EDUCATIONALLY DISADVANTAGED

ERIC DIGEST NO. 76

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

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Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

STRATEGIES FOR RETAINING ADULT STUDENTS: THE EDUCATIONALLY DISADVANTAGED

Retention of adult students is a persistent and perplexing problem for providers of adult education. Participation and nonparticipation are popular subjects in the literature, as researchers attempt to identify characteristics and motivations of adult students and the causes of dropping out. One problem centers around the definition of retention and the value placed on it. Defining retention in terms of program completion is relevant only for some students. For others, retention is successful if students achieve their objectives for participating. Some argue that retention and attrition are neither good nor bad, but that the achievement of the students' goals should be the measure of program success (Holm 1988).

Although retention is a concern in all types of adult programs, this ***ERIC Digest*** focuses on strategies for educationally disadvantaged adults. Updating Fact Sheet No. 12 (Beaudin n.d.), this ***Digest*** looks at causes of nonparticipation, lists general and specific strategies for improving recruitment and retention, and gives examples of successful program models. For more information on adult characteristics, motivations, and barriers to participation, see Brookfield (1986) and Scanlan (1986).

Why Don't They Participate?

The literature on retention of adult learners strongly suggests that previous educational attainment is closely tied to participation and persistence. Educationally disadvantaged adults are more likely to lack self-confidence and self-esteem, have negative attitudes toward education, and need mastery of basic skills such as literacy before attaining job skills that could improve their economic circumstances.

Recent research by Hayes (1988) confirms several propositions about this population: (1) educationally disadvantaged adults typically experience a combination of barriers that cause them to drop out; (2) perception of these barriers varies according to such characteristics as age, sex, and educational level; and (3) even among groups with similar background characteristics, great differences exist in motivation and deterrence factors.

Hayes classified six groups of low-literate adults based on their scores on five deterrence factors: low self-confidence, social disapproval, situational barriers, negative attitude toward education, and low personal priority. Most groups had relatively high scores on more than one factor. This new typology suggests that the most effective recruitment and retention strategy may be to tailor individual programs to the needs of specific groups.

General Retention Strategies

Wlodkowski (1985) provides 68 strategies and examples of learning activities or instructional behavior to carry them out. The following suggestions synthesize the advice of a number of writers and apply to all types of programs:

- Do not seek 100 percent retention. There are different types of attrition; identify which are harmful to the vitality of the program and to student objectives.
- Begin retention efforts with recruitment; devote as much energy to retention as to recruitment.
- Target recruiting at those whom the program is best equipped to serve.
- Emphasize placement, orientation, counseling, and advising early in the program.
- Follow up inactive students with phone calls; have an ongoing process for identifying and tracking these students.

Specific Strategies for Specific Needs

Strategies in this section are grouped by deterrence factors.

Low Self-Confidence

- Make special efforts in the first few weeks to orient students and get them to feel their goals are reachable—first by helping them have realistic goals and expectations.
- Provide comprehensive orientation that includes assessment of ability, self-esteem, learning style, motivations, and values.
- Offer support services such as peer counseling and mentoring.

Social Disapproval

- Emphasize the social aspects (making new friends; warm, friendly atmosphere; informal settings).
- Involve community organizations. Advertise in laundromats, churches, area stores. Use word-of-mouth and door-to-door recruiting, with information coming from *trusted* sources. Distribute program information as inserts in store purchases, paychecks, or telephone bills, or flyers sent home with schoolchildren.
- Increase the visibility of the program through community service projects.
- Provide opportunities for the academic and social integration of students.

Situational Barriers

- Offer programs in accessible neighborhood locations with flexible scheduling to fit adult life-styles.
- Arrange transportation (e.g., car pools) and child care.

Negative Attitudes

- Advertise success stories and use successful students to recruit and to follow up on dropouts.
- Emphasize the difference between adult basic education and regular school.

Low Personal Priority

- Focus on employment and employability skills, job survival, vocabulary and reading related to daily work situations.
- Emphasize daily living/family life skills as a means of improving family relationships.
- Give value for money in terms of education, services, and facilities.

Successful Programs

The Jefferson County Adult Reading Program in Louisville, Kentucky, a National Dissemination Network validated program, has had a 79 percent retention rate using its four-phase model: (1) recruitment, (2) staff training, (3) instructional design, and (4) evaluation (Darling, Puckett, and Paull 1983). Recruitment involves volunteers, the support of community organizations, and use of electronic media such as public service announcements on local radio and television. (Radio campaigns have had 48 percent effectiveness.) Staff are trained using a slide-tape emphasizing psychology of adult learners, counseling techniques, group dynamics, and peer motivation. Instructional materials are individualized, and weekly and midyear project reviews provide feedback for modifying the program.

To increase student retention in adult basic education (ABE) in Arizona, the ***Express Press***, a microcomputer-produced newspaper written by students and instructors, is distributed statewide. A "little magazine" that serves as a curriculum supplement, the ***Express Press*** gives students a medium of expression, a sense of identity, and pride in their accomplishments, thus enhancing self-confidence. Contents include health and safety tips, local news, best seller synopses, sports, trivia, puzzles, and government information (Rio Salado Community College 1985).

Kansas City, Missouri's Adult Education Dropout Project involves counselors, principals, home school coordinators, and outside agencies in dropout identification and referral, making ABE another link in a cooperative educational chain. To alleviate situational barriers and overcome negative attitudes toward previous schooling, telephone calls to prospective students emphasize setting one's own schedule, classes in the neighborhood, individualized instruction, and General Educational Development (GED) Test preparation. During the first year, 75 percent of students referred to the program enrolled in ABE classes (Martin 1987).

Greenville Technical College (South Carolina) makes its community a learning center by bringing basic skills instruction to such sites as hospitals, correctional facilities, community centers, churches, and businesses through a mobile classroom. The program attempts to create a social environment in which education is perceived as important and barriers to participation are reduced. Program features include flexible time units; two vans as student management and curriculum facilities; teams of instructors and volunteers using audiovisual equipment; basic skills linked to a particular degree or diploma program; individualized, mastery-oriented instruction; cost based on contact hours; student learning contracts; and positive reinforcement, including local business incentives for employee participation (Baker 1983).

Conclusion

A common thread in much of the literature discussed here is the instructor as a key factor in retention. Not only the instructor, but all staff should be committed to and involved in recruitment and retention: administrators who set clear program goals and objectives, provide staff development, and include staff and students in decision making; support staff who are friendly, helpful, knowledgeable, and respectful of adult students; and teachers who tailor instruction to student needs, set the climate for learning, listen, allow open discussion, and learn not to take attrition personally.

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